

Minjung Theology in Korea

A Critique from a Reformed Theological Perspective

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EVER SINCE THE FIRST Korean church was built in 1887,¹ by God's grace and providence Christianity has grown quite rapidly. However, the rapid growth of the Korean church has been marked by many political, social, economic and religious conflicts during the last century. As a result, on the one hand the Korean church has grown as a strong, praying, faithful and conservative church through the experience of severe ordeals.² On the other hand, it has experienced many problems³ because of the rapid growth in the process of liberation from Japan and modernization after the Korean War (1950–1953), lacking enough time to grow in maturity.

In the 1970s the Korean economy developed very quickly under the leadership of President Jung Hee Park. However, during this period the Korean people were also engaged in a great political struggle against President Park's military dictatorship. It was at this time that "Minjung Theology" was formulated by so-called liberal Korean theologians, who were deeply concerned about the relationship between contemporary Christianity and Korea's pressing socio-political problems (Daniel Park 1985; Lee 1993, 63). Therefore, even though it is not exactly the same, minjung theology is a Korean version of Liberation Theology in Latin America.

In this study the writer's goal is to analyze the central issues in minjung theology as they arose in their Korean context. It

should be noted as well that I will carry out this discussion from a Reformed missiological perspective in order to construct what I believe are proper biblical responses to those issues. To reach this goal I will first examine the definition and main contents of minjung theology. Second there will be a discussion of the theological backgrounds of minjung theology. Third I will mention three bases of minjung theology, because its concept of social issues is deeply related to these bases. Fourth minjung theology's concept of God will be discussed. Fifth I will offer a critique of the main issue of minjung theology, *han*. Sixth will be a comparison to Marxism and Liberation Theology in Latin America. Seventh I will evaluate minjung theology in terms of its hermeneutics and contextualization from a Reformed missiological perspective.

WHAT IS MINJUNG THEOLOGY

The meaning of 'minjung'

It is very important to understand the term *minjung*⁴ in minjung theology. Kwang-Hee Lee explains its literal meaning as follows: "The word '*minjung*' is a Korean combination of two Chinese characters, '*min*' and '*jung*.' *Min* literally means 'the people,' and '*jung*' means 'the mass.' Combining these two words, '*minjung*' means 'the mass of people' or simply 'the people'." However,

in minjung theology, it has a strong connotation of common people as distinct from rulers. Drawing on this connotation, the minjung theologians define *minjung* as the poor, oppressed and deprived people as opposed to the rich and powerful (Se-Yon Kim 1987, 252). In other words, *minjung* is the social, political and economic suffering people throughout Korea's long history (Lee 1993, 108).

Nam-Dong Suh, one of the core founders of minjung theology, explains the differences between the term *minjung* and other similar terms to clarify its meaning within minjung theology.⁵ First, he distinguishes minjung from *baiksung* (Suh 1983, 225). As a matter of fact, in Korean terminology minjung and *baiksung* are almost the same concept and are interchangeable. But Suh distinguishes the two because *baiksung*, he says, is a word that connotes the ruling class, for example kings or rulers. Therefore he rejects that term as feudalistic and advocates *minjung* because it carries the idea that minjung is master, that the minjung are the subject of history, their own life and their own society. Second, he also distinguishes minjung from *shimin*, which means "citizen." He says that *shimin* is another word that presumes the society and system of the feudalism in the Middle Ages. Minjung has broader classes up from the bottom of society than *shimin*, and the minjung should be the subject of history. Suh also distinguishes the word minjung from the *proletariat*. He says that proletariat highlights economic problems as the driving force behind revolutions in history, but the concept of minjung does not focus so much on economic problems as it is does on cultural and social existence, and it thus is a broader concept than proletariat. Also, Suh distinguishes minjung from *daijung*, which means "the masses." He says that *daijung* is simply the mass of many people together. *Daijung* does not particularly mean disregarded and disabled people. Within dai-

jung, there are also the rich and highbrows. Because it is just a group of many people together, as a socio-political concept the *daijung* is unable to have political subjectivity. But minjung, Suh asserts, is originally a politico-theological concept. The group that is ruled by others is the minjung (Suh 1983, 225–229).

Concerning these clarifications, Suh concludes in the following way:

If I define it in a word, minjung is the common people and masses. However, it has a broader meaning than the proletariat. If we see it from the socio-economic historical perspective, it means the truly oppressed and deprived class. But if we say it from a political and theological perspective, minjung is not always the oppressed and deprived class, but minjung is and should be the subject of history (Suh 1983, 183).

The crucial point of minjung theology

According to minjung theologians it is the minjung who produce the real values in life, and they are therefore the real "subject of history" (Suh 1983, 183; Se-Yoon Kim 1987, 252). Nevertheless, they are exploited and oppressed by the minority ruling class and reduced to the status of the weak, the despised and the condemned. Minjung theologians maintain that the minjung are naive, innocent and long-suffering (Se-Yoon Kim 1987, 252). Also, minjung theologians insist that the point of departure for a proper Christian theology must be the presupposition that God is the God of the minjung and that his salvation history is a history of his liberation or salvation of the minjung from the hands of their oppressors. They hold that it is the task of Korean theology to interpret the *missio Dei*, the saving and liberating acts of God, in the present situation of the minjung in Korea. The methodology they prescribe for this task is socio-economic analysis (Se-Yoon

Kim 1987, 253). Therefore, David Kwang-Sun Suh defines minjung theology as follows: "It is a theology of the oppressed in the Korean political situation, a theological response to the oppressors, to the Korean church and its mission" (David K. Suh 1981, 18).

Theological backgrounds of minjung theology

The founding minjung theologians, such as Nam-Dong Suh and Byungmoo Ahn, were influenced greatly by certain well-known theologians and by worldwide, so-called "liberal" Christian gatherings.

First of all they were influenced by Jürgen Moltmann, the Protestant theologian of Tübingen. He understood Trinitarianism in terms of a "History of God" that is connected with Christ and man rather than as the unreal ritual symbol that has no connection with experience or practice. Through Moltmann minjung theologians were influenced by the concept of the futuristic, historical God, the eschatological unification of God and God as the liberator. They were also influenced by Paul Löffler of the *Missionssakademie*, Hamburg, Germany. He interpreted the cross of Christ and the coming of the reign of God in political terms (Myung-Hyuk Kim 1990, 125-129). Minjung theologians also accepted the theology of history proposed by Pannenberg. According to him, God's revelation cannot be limited to the Bible, but must include secular history as its locus (Lee 1993, 75). Bonhoeffer also influenced the minjung theologians concerning "serving our neighbors." By his influence, Nam-Dong Sun maintained that the Christian faith is "serving our neighbors, and that Jesus is there where we serve others" (Suh 1976, 227).

Besides the above theologians, Liberation Theology in Latin America and Ecumenical Theology (WCC) greatly influenced minjung theologians. According to Liberation theologians, the kingdom is a gift of

God and a work of man. Socio-political liberation is a human achievement and a manifestation of the kingdom. Their concern for context, goals and hermeneutics influenced greatly the formulation of minjung theology. The Third Conference of the WCC (1961), held in New Delhi, dealt with the theme "Salvation Today."⁶ This conference motivated liberal Korean churches to participate in the social and political struggles of Korea (Lee 1993, 79).

THREE BASES FOR MINJUNG THEOLOGY

Minjung theologians take the minjung's socio-econo-political events in the Bible, church history and Korean history as their theological references (Se-Yoon Kim 1987, 253-257).

The biblical basis

A. THE EXODUS EVENT

Minjung theology refers seriously to the Bible as being fundamentally an account of oppressed people's experience and history. In minjung theology the Bible becomes non-religious; it becomes socio-economic history. The Scriptures are not the revelation given by God. Minjung theology takes history and culture as the best references; the Bible is only a record of an oppressed people's experience. On this presupposition, minjung theology emphasizes the exodus event and Christ's crucifixion and resurrection as biblical bases. Besides these events, the Code of Covenant (Exodus 20:22-23:19), Micah and Amos in the Old Testament, and Luke 4:18-21 and Mark's Gospel in the New Testament are important biblical references for minjung theology (Lee 1993, 96, 97, 109).

Suh contends that the exodus of the Hebrew people from their slavery in Egypt constitutes the first aspect of the biblical basis of minjung theology (Se-Yoon Kim

1987, 253). He criticizes traditional theology for interpreting the exodus spiritually and removing its historical, socio-economic significance. Thus Suh argues that the exodus as a socio-economic event has the status of an archetype or paradigm for God's intervention in history and that such intervention takes place in the socio-economic arena today as well (Suh 1983, 51). Likewise, minjung theologians claim that in the Old Testament Yahweh is the God of minjung, the minjung are the people of God and God's saving work is directed toward liberating the minjung (Se-Yoon Kim 1987, 254).

B. THE INTERPRETATION OF ὄχλος ("OCHLOS")

Byung-Moo Ahn and a couple of Japanese New Testament scholars provide an additional biblical base through their interpretation of the Greek word ὄχλος⁷ in the Gospel of Mark. These scholars hold that Mark uses ὄχλος not merely to refer to a crowd but as a significant theological concept. They say it refers to the poor, the oppressed, the despised, the sick and so on, including tax collectors, harlots and sinners. According to Ahn, Jesus did not love all equally but rather showed a partisan love for the ochlos (minjung), accepting them unconditionally and protecting them without evaluating them in any way⁸ (Se-Yoon Kim 1987, 254). Let us see Byungmoo Ahn's descriptions of the characteristics of the ochlos and the attitude of Jesus toward them in the Gospel of Mark as seen through Sang-Bok Lee's translation:

1. Mark deliberately avoided the term *laos* and used the term *ochlos* to indicate the minjung.⁹
2. The term ochlos is not consolidated as a concept but defined in a relational way and is therefore a fluid notion.
3. The ochlos are feared by the unjust and powerful but they are not organized into a power group.

4. Jesus sides with the ochlos and accepts them as they are without making any conditions.

5. Jesus does not give the impression that he intends to organize the ochlos into a force.

6. In a word, Jesus informed the minjung of "the advent of God's kingdom."

7. Jesus proclaimed the coming of God's kingdom. He stands with the minjung and promises them the future of God (Ahn 1981, 149-50; Lee 1993, 82).

According to Ahn, Jesus' decision to go to Galilee after the arrest of John the Baptist (Mark 1:14-15) indicates that he entered into the situation of the minjung as one of them. Galilee was the land of the oppressed, alienated and exploited minjung (ochlos), and for the minjung his proclamation of the imminence of the kingdom of God constituted a message of hope (Se-Yoon Kim 1987, 254).

C. JESUS' CRUCIFIXION AND RESURRECTION

Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection are another significant biblical basis of minjung theology. Minjung theologians understand Jesus' crucifixion as a political event, resulting from political motivation. Sun insists that the sentencing of Jesus to the cross was due to his political uprising against the Jerusalem rulers who were exploiting minjung, which eliminates the redemptive meaning of the cross (Myung-Hyuk Kim 1990, 144). Behind this idea is the tendency of minjung theology to identify Jesus Christ as a collective symbol. Byung-Moo Ahn says that clearly:

It was not Jesus of Nazareth but rather minjung who was unjustly tried and crucified.... Jesus as the Son of Man is just a collective symbol. The death of minjung on the cross represents the breaking of a vicious circle of avenging violence by means of violence. That Jesus was raised means that the minjung of

Galilee were raised (Se-Yoon Kim 1987, 255).

Minjung theologians also interpret Jesus' resurrection and the resurrection of the saints in the same way. Suh calls the death of Jesus "a political murder" and the resurrection "a protest and resolution of han." Also the resurrection of the believers as those who were killed innocently or mistreated is the resolution of han. Therefore, he says, those who have died after a natural life span are excluded from the resurrection. For the "resurrection will only be of those who were killed." Thus, minjung theology accepts the resurrection as "a socio-political concept," the "effort toward a new society" and "a Messianic politics" (Myung-Hyuk Kim 1990, 144–45).

CHURCH HISTORY

Minjung theologians see church history in a totally different way from the perspective of conservative Protestant theologians. This new interpretation of church history is the other basis of minjung theology. Nam-Dong Suh develops his new perspective of church history, taken from within the minjung's political movements, through critiques of the early churches. First he argues as follows:

The political movement of Jesus was depoliticized when the Hellenistic church transformed its original historical framework based on Hebrew thought into a metaphysical framework based on Hellenistic thought, transformed the political messiah of the minjung into the Christ of heaven, and transformed the political cross into a religious symbol (Suh 1983, 248).

Second, he criticizes Constantine as the person who made Christianity a rulers' religion:

When Constantine adopted Christianity as the state religion, Christianity became

decidedly a religion of rulers and began to lose its apocalyptic and revolutionary character. Thus, Christianity came to project the kingdom of God as a temporal kingdom, beyond history, and the Christian faith came to function as an opiate for the minjung (Suh 1983, 258).

In these criticisms Suh indicates that the church preserved the apocalyptic and revolutionary character of the Jesus movement in the concept of the millennial kingdom, and he insists that this concept be revived today so that it may coexist with the concept of the kingdom of God¹⁰ (Suh 1983, 249). Based upon this totally different interpretation, Suh insists that the goal of minjung theology is as follows:

It is the goal of minjung theology to reunify the purification of individual souls on the one hand and the humanization of the social structure on the other—elements of genuine Christianity that have been separated by the church's depoliticization of the original gospel (Suh 1983, 256).

THE TRADITION OF THE MINJUNG MOVEMENT IN KOREAN HISTORY

Minjung theologians are also trying to find a basis for their theology in various minjung movements in Korean history (Suh 1983, 66–68; Se-Yoon Kim 1987, 257). Explaining the history of Korean minjung movements, Nam-Dong Suh points out 14 historical events as the genealogy of minjung movements. Through this genealogy of minjung movements he shows that there have been many movements of liberation of the poor and oppressed (the minjung) in Korea, from the earliest periods of Korean history to the present. Among these, Suh and minjung theologians have pointed out especially three historical minjung movements in Korea as the best examples of minjung's struggle for self-liberation (Lee 1993, 65).

First, minjung theologians like to point to the *Tonghak* Revolution in 1894 as their foundation. In the *Tonghak* Revolution, the oppressed minjung defined themselves as the subject of their own history and destiny (Lee 1993, 79). Second, minjung theologians are trying to find their spirit in the March First Independence Movement, in 1919, against Japan. Thirdly, minjung theologians regard the April Nineteenth Revolution of Students against the government of President Lee as another root. Minjung theologians interpret these events as the minjung's struggle for a liberation stimulated by Christianity. Suh characterizes all such movements as "messianic" and insists that they must be understood in terms of God's struggle for his justice and freedom¹¹ (Se-Yoon Kim 1987, 257).

THE CONCEPT OF GOD IN MINJUNG THEOLOGY

There is no God-concept in minjung theology, because the major interest of minjung theology is not the traditional Christian God but the historical man, minjung. Myung-Hyuk Kim explained that point very clearly. "They insist that it is time to think of God as a historical God who acts in history and man, instead of the doctrinal, metamorphic ontological God of traditional Christianity" (Myung-Hyuk Kim 1990, 136).

Thus, man in Minjung theology is not a mere rational being but a concrete actual being who is exploited and suppressed, not an individual, but a communal minjung. Since the object of minjung theology is the historical minjung, minjung's God is the God who lives along with minjung, is immanent within minjung, and is equal to minjung. Nam-Dong Suh says that "Jesus had not claimed himself as a hero, but came down into minjung to identify with minjung; therefore, Christ is minjung and minjung is the messiah" (Suh 1983, 168). Therefore, minjung theologians opine that

the urgent objective of theology today is to interpret theology in the light of socio-economic history.

If we think of this point from the perspective of Reformed hermeneutics, minjung theology denies the absolute God who is transcendent. It identifies the triune God with human beings or human culture. It is trying to accept the triune God only in homocentric culture.

HAN, THE GREATEST ISSUE OF MINJUNG THEOLOGY

According to Minjung theologians, *han* is one of the most significant concepts. As Witvliet points out, *han* is a very important issue in minjung theology (Witvliet 1985, 164) and is really hard to explain in a single word. Sang-Bok Lee explains the term as follows: "Han is a Korean word which may be defined as 'deep agony and sorrow,' 'accumulated bitterness,' and 'resentment.' It can also be translated as a collective feeling of unresolved resentment against unjustifiable suffering" (Lee 1993, 93).

Nam-dong Suh defines *han* as follows:

Therefore 'han' is an underlying feeling of the oppressed Korean people. On the one hand, it is a dominant feeling of defeat, resignation, and nothingness. On the other hand, it is a feeling with a tenacity of will for life which comes to weaker beings. The first aspect can sometimes be sublimated to great artistic expressions and the second aspect could erupt as the energy for revolution or rebellion¹² (Suh 1983, 87).

Minjung theology deals with this minjung's "han" rather than minjung's "sin" as a core theme (Myung-Hyuk Kim 1990, 146). Minjung theologians do not understand a sinner as a person who has sinned against God and his neighbor. Nam-Dong Suh writes, "Sin is only a label that the ruling puts to the weak and the opponents, and so-called sinners are actually victims of the crime

and suffer" (Suh 1983, 244). Therefore, Suh insists significantly as follows:

The core issue of minjung theology is the issue of 'han' rather than 'sin.' The role of the church is that of how she may remove the minjung's han.... It is very dangerous to mention sin without this sociological analysis. The issue we are facing now is the issue of 'han,' not the problem of 'sin.' Not the problem of 'sin,' but the social condition that leads us to commit sin. Not the problem of sin, but the problem of tyranny (Suh 1983, 243, 244).

Chi-Ha Kim, the Korean Catholic lay-theologian, refers to dan as the only possibility to break out of the situation of han. Dan is to overcome han. Personally, it is self-denial. Collectively, it is to cut a vicious circle of revenge (Kuster 1994, 114).

Minjung theology, thus, in place of salvation through a restored relationship between God and man by repentance of sin and forgiveness, understands salvation as a humanization process through the resolution of the han's predicament by such means as liberation, expression and clarifications. Therefore, as Myung-Hyuk Kim points out, in Minjung theology no repentance is necessary. A sinner is not to be ashamed, but bold. Minjung theology speaks of "working out one's own salvation" in which minjung is the subject, instead of a dependent salvation that relies on the blood of Christ (Myung-Hyuk Kim 1990, 147).

MARXISM AND MINJUNG THEOLOGY

It is necessary to distinguish minjung theology from Marxism. Actually, minjung theologians reject Marxism.¹³ In examining minjung theology, Donald Clark notes, "One key point is that it is non-marxist and does not use marxist language. This, of course, is a requirement in South Korea" (Clark 1986, 45).

Marxist socio-economic theory is powerful in its analysis of the structure of the Latin American society and for constructing liberation theology. But the case in Korea is different. According to A. Sang Park, minjung theologians found that marxism is not the best instrument to analyze Korean social problems because the Korean minjung experience of socio-economic and political oppression occurred before the introduction of capitalism into Korea (Park 1984, 9). The stories of minjung contain the history of the suffering minjung, their courageous resistance against their rulers and the vision of a new society.

After examining the difference between the minjung and the marxist proletariat, William Ferm finally says, "The proletariat is defined socio-economically, while the minjung is known politically" (Ferm 1987, 374). Sang-Bok Lee also explored this issue and writes, "The Korean minjung (people) do not tolerate marxism because they experienced the Marxists' terror during the Korean Civil War from 1950–1953, started by North Korean Communists" (Lee 1993, 88).

Minjung theology is branded as a pro-marxist theology by many of the conservative Korean churches, as it identifies itself with a humanistic revolutionary theology. Though the conservative churches in Korea have the tendency to say that minjung theology is a pro-marxist theology, the concept of minjung is not the same as the marxist proletariat.

However I would argue that even though minjung theology is not the same as Marxism, as a matter of fact the methodology of minjung theology is similar to Marxism. This is true, for example, with regard to its understanding of and attitude towards violence.¹⁴ Commonly, minjung theologians try to justify violence on the basis of "the desperate situation" in the social and political dimensions. At the same time, they justify minjung's (the oppressed people's) violence toward the rulers for their liberation on

the basis of legitimate self-defense, which the violated one uses against the violator (Suh 1983, 200–201).

However Scripture does not support violence for justice in minjung theology and Marxism. In the Old Testament God uses violence as a means for divine judgment against sin. One cannot find that kind of violence in the life of Christ on the earth. He did not allow the way of violence against structural injustice. One violence of man will bring another violence.

MINJUNG THEOLOGY AND LIBERATION THEOLOGY

As Theo Sundermeier points out, minjung theology can be categorized as liberation theology, though not as systematically developed as Latin American Liberation Theology¹⁵ (Sundermeier 1987, 48). However, those theologies are not the same. A. Sang Park made the distinction very clearly. He says:

Poverty is the single biggest problem in Latin America. Because of the huge gap between the rich (minority) and the poor (majority), Latin American Liberation Theology is mainly concerned with the liberation of the poor. [On the other hand,] in Korea, social problems arise from cultural, social, political repression as well as economic oppression (Park 1984, 7).

On the basis of this analysis, he argues that the term “minjung” designates not only the economically oppressed, but also the culturally, politically and socially oppressed. Of course, we cannot exclude the fact that the poor in Latin America have been exploited politically, socially and culturally as well as economically. However, as Park mentions, in the Latin America context the main source of their oppression comes within the economic dimension. In that sense, the concept of minjung is broader than that of the Latin American poor.

Minjung theology, therefore, is somewhat similar to Black Theology in the United States. Their problems are really multi-dimensional. Black people can be called the oppressed (minjung) in the United States from the perspective of minjung theology. Their problem is somehow similar to the Korean minjung’s problem. The minjung are made up of political outcasts, laborers, women, the poor, the illiterate, the illegitimate, et cetera (Park 1984, 8).

EVALUATION AND CRITICISM

On the hermeneutics of Minjung Theology

Reformed theologians believe that the Bible is without error, the only source of theology, and the starting point of all areas of study (Berkhof 1974, 40–66). On the basis of this absolute presupposition, Reformed hermeneutics requires four principles of interpretation: grammatical-syntactical, historical-cultural, theological (Berkhof 1974, 66–165), and contextual (Lee 1993, 103).

On the contrary, minjung theologians suggest a sociological hermeneutic on the basis of their belief that social conditions determine humanity and interpretation (Lee 1993, 110). Minjung theology, therefore, employs a socio-political hermeneutic of the Christian gospel from the viewpoint of the past and the present experience of minjung suffering. This theology asserts that the biblical message cannot be fully understood until we understand the history of the Korean minjung because, minjung theologians say, the Bible is rooted in the history of the biblical minjung. Therefore, minjung theologians argue that the gospel and the history of the Korean minjung are to be interpreted through the hermeneutical process of minjung theology (Park 1984, 10).

Identical to the explanations of Nam-dong Suh and Byung-Moo Ahn, A. Sang Park

clearly insists on the basic hermeneutical task of minjung theology in the following way:

The basic hermeneutical task of minjung theology is not to interpret the Bible (text) in the light of the Korean situation (the context), but to interpret the suffering experience of the Korean minjung (the context) in the light of the Bible (text). Minjung theology contends that the minjung do not exist for the authority of the Bible, but the authority of the Bible exists for the freedom of the minjung. This does not mean that the minjung are more important than the Bible; it means that the minjung are a starting point for a biblical hermeneutics (Park 1984, 10).

Thus minjung theologians reject the Bible as the fundamental and absolute source for hermeneutics and reject virtually all the doctrines of the Old and New Testaments and the historic church. Instead, they appeal to only a few elements of the Bible, interpreting them arbitrarily, and to some marginal examples within church history that orthodox Christians have judged to be aberrations from the true path of faith. Furthermore their theology contains many sub-Christian and anti-Christian elements. Therefore according to the Bible as the only and absolute basis of theology and hermeneutics, we should say that minjung theology and its hermeneutics are wrong. This is because, as Se-Yoon Kim pointed out, "No theology that rejects virtually all the doctrines of the New Testament and the historic church can lay any claim to being a Christian theology" (Se-Yoon Kim 1987, 273).

On the contextualization of Minjung Theology

Contextualization is a theological necessity demanded by the incarnational nature of the Word (Lee 1993, 115). Bruce Nicolls defines contextualization as "the translation of the unchanging content of the gospel of

the kingdom into verbal form meaningful to the peoples in their separate cultures and within their particular existential situation" (Nicholls 1975, 647). Therefore, the most significant issue in the process of contextualization is how we transform the gospel to a context without changing the meanings of the biblical truth. Sang-Bok Lee defines it thusly: "Contextualization, therefore, refers to the process by which indigenous cultural forms and ideas are utilized to communicate biblical truth within a given contextual milieu without changing the meanings of the biblical truth" (Lee 1993, 118).

Minjung theology contends to be a contextualized theology focused upon the actual struggles of the life of the Korean minjung. In this process minjung theology emphasizes secularization and the work of "Holy Spirit."¹⁶ In their attempt at contextualization, minjung theologians believe that the minjung-oriented church is the real church of Christ; therefore, for them, to serve the suffering minjung politically and economically is to serve Jesus himself (Lee 1993, 123–124).

Minjung theology is a good example of Christian theology degenerating into syncretism in the process of contextualization when biblical particularism is not adequately protected. Se-Yoon Kim insists, "it should serve as a strong warning to enthusiasts of a radical contextualization of the gospel or of Christian theology" (Se-Yoon Kim 1987, 273).

CONCLUSION

Today minjung theology is a well-known contemporary theology of missions that began in Korea in the 1970s. Within the last 40 years, in different contexts in the world, several contemporary theologies have been formulated by liberal theologians in terms of "missions"; for example, Liberation Theology in Latin America, Political Theology in

Germany, Black Theology in United States, Feminist Theology, and Minjung Theology in Korea. These theologies have the same target of missions, which is to liberate people from various forms of social, economic and political oppression.

Minjung theology is a contemporary theology that came out of the struggle of the liberal theologians for social and political justice in Korea. It takes the minjung's socio-economical events in the Bible, church history and Korean history as its theological references, then carries out its contextualization through syncretism, humanization and secularization, then identifies all social actions and radical reformation with evangelism as its mission. Therefore, in a word, minjung theology is heretical in the light of the Scriptures.¹⁷

However when viewed from a more positive perspective, minjung theology can be considered as a challenge within Korean Christianity. Traditionally, the Korean Protestant church has been characterized as very conservative and enthusiastic about growth, but lacking social concern. I would argue that this character of the Korean church provided two extreme movements in Korean church history, especially during the 1970s: one is the Pentecostal movement represented by Rev. Yong-Gi Cho, and the other is minjung theology and the social gospel movement. Therefore, in a sense, minjung theology has become an inevitable reproof for the weakness of the Korean Protestant church to give adequate attention to the needs of the poor and oppressed. Within this situation, minjung theology has become a great challenge for the Korean church to give its attention to the total growth and maturity that deeply considers social dimensions as well as spiritual dimensions.

Combined with such a positive evaluation, I would like to point out two fundamental problems in minjung theology.

First, minjung theology tries to combine biblical and Korean history. It is a theology that starts from man's situations and ends for man's glory. In other words, it cares only about homocentric culture and not about the absolute and transcendent God and His truth. As a human-centered contemporary theology, minjung theology focuses on "now—not the future or eternal," "man—not God" and "better conditions in freedom—not man's essential condition." Minjung theologians advocate this theology as follows: "Minjung theology is not primarily concerned about Korean Christians in particular, but the oppressed Korean minjung in general," and "Minjung theology is a theology for the oppressed minjung, of the oppressed minjung, and by the oppressed minjung (Park 1984, 10–11). According to minjung theologians, the minjung are not the object but the subject of the Bible, of history and of the Church. Therefore, Myung-Hyuk Kim has said that "Minjung theology has gone out of the theological boundary. For its major interest is not God or Jesus of the Bible but the liberation and humanization of minjung" (Myung-Hyuk Kim 1990, 149).

Second, I define this theology as a "temporary theology" or "fashion theology." This is because in minjung theology, one cannot have the eternal and unchangeable goal. We Reformed theologians have an eternal and unchangeable goal: to glorify God forever in any situation. This goal has not been changed at any time or any place through all history. Of course, minjung theologians will answer that they also have an eternal and unchangeable goal: to liberate minjung forever. However, many of the issues that they faced in Korea in the 1970s are meaningless today. According to changing social and political conditions, their issues and even the theology itself has changed or been lost. As a matter of fact, in Korea today minjung theology has become more of a minority group as compared to the

1970s and the 1980s, and people as a whole are not concerned any more about this theology. It is a temporary or fashion theology.

Finally, thinking of how to deal with minjung theology from the Reformed missiological perspective, I wish to argue a point for the Korean church. That is, the Korean church should establish a total biblical theology of missions. The Korean church has had a strong tendency to stand on the faith of "Scripture alone," as the Reformers advocated. This has been a strong basis of Korean church growth. However, it is also significant to stand on "the total Scripture" that the same Reformers advocated. Because of failing to see all aspects of living under all of Scripture, the Korean church has developed many theological, practical, and missiological problems.

Related to this point, Sang-Bok Lee recommends the following points: (1) the (Korean) churches should plan for maturity instead of only numerical growth, (2) they should have a holistic mission: evangelism and social concern, (3) the churches should conduct sound contextual hermeneutics, (4) God-centered critical contextualization is significant to avoid syncretism, (5) the churches should develop a comprehensive biblical understanding of the kingdom of God, especially in its missiological dimensions (Lee 1993, 156). I agree with these five suggestions and they thus make a fitting conclusion to this study.

NOTES

¹ On September 27, 1887, 14 Korean converts gathered together for worship at the Missionary Horace G. Underwood's home in Chungdong, Seoul. It was the first organized church in Korea (Yang-Sun Kim 1971, 68).

² Sungkuh Chung examined the growth of the Korean church from the perspective of God's providence and the Calvinistic preaching of Korean pastors through the suffering ages in Korean history (Chung 1996, 17, 21).

³ Kyung-Bae Min separated those problems into several categories. For example, the loss of the original simple faith, the loss of the tradition and faithfulness of Korean church and the divisions of Korean church (Min 1987, 8,9).

⁴ Historically speaking, the term *minjung* came to be used during the Lee dynasty (1392-1910). In those days, the plebeians were oppressed by the Yangban class and anyone who was excluded from the Yangban class was a minjung (Park 1984, 2). Broadly speaking, there were three classes in those days. Yangban was the high and ruling class. The second class was called *Pyungmin*, which included the plebeians. The third class was the *Sangnom*. This class was the lowest class and generally served the Yangban.

⁵ He explains these differences in "the concept of minjung" (Suh 1983, 224-231). According to Byungmoo Ahn, one of the foremost minjung theologians, "minjung is indefinable" because "it is a holistic, dynamic, and changing reality, one which escapes categorization" (Ahn 1991, 27).

⁶ Philip Potter explained this theme "as being personal and social liberation from everything which prevented man from attaining authentic existence in justice and community" (Bosch 1976, 65).

⁷ He distinguishes *ochlos* (minjung) from *laos* (people or citizen) and *mazetai* (disciples). See Ahn's "Ochlos and Mazetai" in *Stories of Minjung Theology* (1991): 273ff.

⁸ Ahn maintains that Mark's presentation of the life and fate of Jesus is not a biography of an individual but a "social biography" of the *ochlos* (minjung). The term "Jesus," "Son of God," "Messiah," "Son of Man," and the like are not references to the individual Jesus but collective terms for the *ochlos-minjung* (Ahn, "Jesus and Ochlos," in *Minjung and Korean Theology in Korea*, 90-91, 97.)

⁹ *Laos* is accepted as the meaning of "God's people" and *ochlos* as "the outcast" (Park 1984, 5).

¹⁰ According to Suh, the concept of the kingdom of God in church history represents the doctrine of salvation through a savior, whereas the concept of the millennial kingdom represents the doctrine of salvation through the minjung's own struggles (Se-Yoon Kim 1987, 256).

¹¹ On this presupposition, Yong-Bok Kim, one of the minjung theologians, does not hesitate to call Jae-Woo Choi, the founder of the *Tonghak* religious

movement, "Messiah Choi" or "Jesus Choi" (Se-Yoon Kim 1987, 257; Myung-Hyuk Kim 1990, 258).

¹² Nam-Dong Suh has pointed out four main ways that the han have suffered during Korean history and calls them the Fourfold Han of the Korean people: (1) Koreans have suffered numerous invasions by surrounding powerful nations so that the very existence of the Korean nation has come to be understood as han. (2) Koreans have continually suffered under the tyranny of rulers so that they think of their existence as oppressed people. (3) Also, under Confucianism's strict imposition of laws and customs discriminating against women, the existence of women was han itself. (4) At a certain point in Korean history, about half of the population was registered as hereditary slaves and were treated as property rather than as people of the nation (Suh 1981, 54).

¹³ Actually, Nam-Dong Suh makes a distinction between the concept of "minjung" and "proletarian" (Suh 1983, 226-28) and he strongly insists on "human dignity" over against the socialist attitude of "only social revolution" (Suh 1983, 198). Also, Byung-Moo Ahn grew up in a miserable situation under communism, so he strongly rejects Marxism (Ahn 1991, 17-19).

¹⁴ Nam-Dong Suh argues this theme in his book, *Minjung Shinhak U Tamgu* (1983): 200-201, and Byun-Moo Ahn also deals with it in his book, *Minjung Shinhak Iyagi* (1991): 76-77.

¹⁵ Liberation theology was born in Latin America in the late 1960s in struggling with the faith and postcolonial deprivation. It pursuits to reinterpret the traditional faith of the church from the perspective of the poor and oppressed. Gutierrez defines liberation as "Liberation from every form of exploitation, the possibility of a more human and dignified life, the creation of a new mankind—all pass through this struggle" (Gutierrez 1988, 174).

¹⁶ For minjung theologians, the Spirit is a "dynamic force for the realization of minjung consciousness" (Yong-Bok Kim 1982, 134), and the "pan-universal, pan-historical movement" (Nam-Dong Suh 1982, 123). Their concept of the Spirit is Shamanistic because, according to Shamanism, everything is regarded as a manifestation of the Spirit or spirits (Lee 1993, 125).

¹⁷ Se-Yoon Kim defines minjung theology as "non-Christian" or "bizarre" theology, and he points out further problems in minjung theology (Se-Yoon Kim 1987, 272).

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